

THE
THEOSOPHICAL STUDENT

IN FACE OF REVELATION,
INSPIRATION, AND OBSERVATION

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*A Lecture delivered at the British Convention of
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INTRODUCTION

THE Research Centre of the English Section of the Theosophical Society exists, as its title tells us, to do study and research in matters of importance and interest related to Theosophy. Actually, its scope is more than this, in that it aims at providing groups where instruction can be carried out under the leadership of people who are expert in some particular field, such as science, letters, medicine or psychology. In short, it seeks gradually to build up something of a college for advanced study such as a University might provide. True, this is a long way from being realised. but unless a beginning is made, nothing greater can ever emerge.

If anything of this kind is to succeed, however, it is essential that both study and research should be approached from the right angle. There can be little doubt that within the framework of human understanding, there are certain fundamental truths about the System in which we live which are basic and unchanging. These we have, stated for us in human language, in various ancient Scriptures. But as the mind of man evolves, his perception of these truths must develop too. If it does not do so, or if any attempt is made to prevent that development, man suffers. Thus, if dogmatic schemes are evolved, to believe which is made a *sine qua non*, then truth apparently dies. To be more exact, it does not die, but it is lost, it retires to a place where the mind does not see it. Moreover, where an attempt is made to crystallise belief, a time inevitably comes when progressive minds rebel and, in breaking open the prison of an outworn creed, they are apt to throw over also things which are of real and enduring value.

We are thus brought face to face with the need to balance tradition and the experience of others with the need to express new phases of understanding, belonging to fresh developments of human consciousness.

In the Theosophical Society this is as much the case as anywhere else. We have had great leaders of thought in the past, and some there are who have tried to crystallise Theosophy on the basis of what these leaders have said and written: as if they could! For Theosophy in the true sense, and dogmatism are incompatibles: where dogma exists, Theosophy flies and is no longer found.

In reprinting in pamphlet form this lecture, by Dr. Besant, the Research Centre feel that they are doing three things. For one, they are showing how "advanced" Dr. Besant was in her thought. Note the date of the original, 1909, nearly forty years ago, and before the great physical and mental upheavals of the two wars. Second, they are countering any charge which may be made that Dr. Besant and those of her time attempted to impose their views on others and to create a theosophical orthodoxy and consequently to dub those who did not agree with them as heretics. It is very obvious that this was not so; and that if there was anything of the kind in theosophical ranks, it came into being in spite of, and not because of, those who were its wisest leaders.

Thirdly, and most important, there is the actual value of the lecture itself as a guide to our studies. The material is brilliant and brilliantly expressed, if one allows for the style, which belongs to its own time, besides being the report of a speech rather than a written article. We can learn a lot from it of *how* to study and how to balance tradition against experience in our work. Dr. Besant encourages us to go ahead and make our own experience and experiments, while relating these to traditional sources and knowledge won by other students—among whom she numbers herself. She does not tell us to stick to what others have said, even if they know more than we do, for she fully recognises that a fragment of direct experience is worth any amount of second-hand wisdom which is not part of the fabric of ourselves.

Thus, though originally published so long ago, it seems a singularly opportune moment to republish this lecture as an up-to-date document and one of such value that it would be a pity if it were to be forgotten in the archives of the Society.

In conclusion, thanks and acknowledgments must be given to the President of the Society and to the Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Madras, for permission to use their copyright for this purpose.

L. J. Bendit, M.D.,

London, April, 1948.

Chairman, T.R.C.

The Theosophical Student

in face of

Revelation, Inspiration, and Observation

FRIENDS: Those who seriously take up the study of Theosophy should not be satisfied with the mere reading of the voluminous theosophical literature poured out into the world through the centuries of the past, and continuing to flow into it in our own days. They should, in addition, if they have any innate faculty for such investigation, prepare to develop the faculties by which they may verify for themselves that which they are told by others. But in all cases much theoretical study is desirable before passing on into the practical, and in most cases it may not be possible to develop the subtler senses within the limits of the present incarnation, although a good foundation may be laid for such development in the next. Hence theoretical study must form a large part of the training of every theosophical student, and his attitude towards such study is a matter of serious importance. He needs to discriminate between the books he reads, and to suit his attitude to the type of the book; he must seek to understand what is meant by Revelation, what by Inspiration, and to distinguish revealed from inspired literature, and both from the records of observations.

Some Scriptures which are regarded as authoritative lie at the back of all the great religions. Thus, Hinduism has the Veda. The word means knowledge, and this knowledge is of that which is eternally true. It is the knowledge of the Logos, the knowledge of the Lord of a universe; the know-

ledge of what *is*, not of what *seems*; the knowledge of realities, not of phenomena. This abides ever in the Logos; it is part of Himself. In its manifested form, as revealed for the helping of man, it becomes the *Vedas*, and in this form goes through many stages, until finally little of the original remains. All Hindu schools of philosophy acknowledge the supreme authority of the Vedas; but after this formal acknowledgment is made, the intellect is allowed to range freely at its will—to inquire, to judge, to speculate. Rigid as Hinduism is in its social polity, it has ever left the human intellect free; in philosophy, in metaphysic, it has ever realised that truth should be sought, and no penalty inflicted on error; error being sufficiently penalised by the fact that it *is* error, and breeds misfortunes under natural laws. Even to-day that ancient liberty is maintained, and a man may think and write as he will provided that he follows in practice the social customs of his caste. The Hindu divides all knowledge into two types—the supreme and the lower. In the lower he places all his sacred books—following in this the dictum of an Upanishad¹—together with all other literature, all science, all instruction; in the category of the supreme he places only “the knowledge of Him by whom all else is known.” There you have Hinduism in a nutshell. When once supreme knowledge has been attained and illumination has been experienced, all Scriptures become useless. This is asserted plainly and boldly in a well-known passage in the *Bhagavad Gita*: “All the Vedas are as useful to an enlightened Brahmana as is a tank in a place covered over with water.”² What need of a tank when water is everywhere? What need of Scriptures when the man is enlightened? Revelation is useless to the man to whom the Self is revealed.

In the early days of Buddhism the Vedas held high place, for the Lord Buddha, as Dr. Rhys Davids says, “was born and brought up, and lived and died a Hindu.”³ But the charter of intellectual freedom for Buddhists is contained in the wise advice of their Teacher: “Do not believe in a thing said merely because it is said; nor in traditions because they have been handed down from antiquity; nor in rumours, as such; nor in writings by sages, merely

¹ *Mundakopanishat*, I, i, 5. ² *Loc. cit.*, ii, 46. ³ *Buddhism*, p. 116.

because sages wrote them . . . nor on the mere authority of your own teachers or masters. But we are to believe when the writing, doctrine, or saying is corroborated by our own reason and consciousness. For this I have taught you: not to believe merely because you have heard; but when you believed of your own consciousness, then to act accordingly and abundantly.”¹ Even revelation, for the Buddhist, must be brought to the touchstone of reason and consciousness; there must be a response to it from within, the interior witness of the Self, ere it can be accepted as authoritative.

In the Christian and Muhammadan faiths—both largely influenced by Judaism—the authoritative nature of revelation is carried further than in any earlier faith. In modern days the yoke of a revealed Scripture has been much lightened for Christianity by the growth of the critical spirit and by the researches of scholars. The modern Christian student is little more hampered by his revelation than is the Hindu by his. A conventional reverence is yielded, a lifting of the hat, and then the student goes freely on his way.

What is Revelation? It is a communication from a Being superior to humanity of facts known to Himself but unknown to those to whom He makes the revelation—facts which they cannot reach by the exercise of the powers that they have so far evolved. These facts can be verified at any time by one who has climbed to the level of the Revealer, who may be an Avatara, a Rishi, a Founder of a religion. They “speak with authority,” the authority of knowledge, the one authority to which all sane men bow. We do not find that these great Beings wrote down Their teachings Themselves; They taught, but They did not record. Some follower, some disciple, it may be after the lapse of many years, even of centuries, wrote down what he or his forefathers had heard; hence the revelation—and to this rule there is probably no exception—is inevitably to some extent coloured, narrowed, distorted by the transcriber. That which was heard originally by those round the divine Teacher exists indeed in the akashic records, and may ever be recovered thence by those who have developed the inner senses by which those records may be read. In

¹ *Kalama Sutta of the Anguttara Nikaya.*

many cases true records will have been made at the time by highly qualified persons; but such precious books are kept securely in the custody of their chosen guardians, in secret temples, in rock libraries, available for the study of high Occultists, but of none other.

The Muhammadans would claim that in the case of their sacred book there is more certainty that the very words of their Prophet were preserved. And doubtless to this is due the overwhelming authority of *Al Quran* in the minds of the faithful of Islam.

What should be the attitude of the Theosophical Student towards revelation? He should treat the Scriptures of the world with reverence, remembering their origin, but none of them with submission, remembering that they are transmitted to him by varied channels. He should call to his aid the best scholarship, should gain all the light he can from archæological and historical researches, and use his best critical judgment in separating the essential truth revealed from all the accretions that may have grown up around it. If he has developed his higher psychic qualities, he should try to trace and disentangle the ancient from the modern, and search the akashic records for comparison, confirmation, or contradiction of the revelation as it has come into his hands. How immense might be the services of such Theosophical Students as they become more numerous and better equipped for this gigantic task. And without this external equipment much may be done by inner unfoldment; he may unfold within himself his own spiritual powers; he may seek in profound meditation the truth which shines in the revelation beneath many a veil of ignorance and misconstruction; he may so purify his life that his bodies will become translucent of the light of the spirit within him, will illumine the written words. "The things of God knoweth no man but the Spirit of God." But that Spirit dwells in every child of man; and as His light shines out, the divine things are revealed to the pure in heart. Until the inner Spirit thus responds to the revealed teachings and statements, the Theosophical Student must hold his judgment in suspense before the claims of any revelation. It is not true for him until he

can re-echo it in the voice of his own Spirit, his deepest Self. Useful and beautiful it may be; worthy of profoundest study and reverent research are the world's Bibles. But until they are affirmed by the Spirit within submission cannot be yielded, lest that should be given to the errors of men which is due only to the divine Spirit.

What is Inspiration? The raising of the normal human faculties by some extraneous influence through grade after grade of intellectual, moral, and spiritual power, up to the point where the extraneous influence may even expel the man from his body and use it for the expression of another individual; where the new possessor is a Being at a height utterly transcending man, inspiration may pass into revelation. Some may think the word should be restricted to the raising of the powers of the subject from above their normal capacity to the highest point of their possible exercise, short of the expulsion of their owner and his replacement by another individual greater than himself.

The lower grades of inspiration are within the experience of very many. Have you never felt, when listening to a speaker whose knowledge and power transcended your own, that your mental faculties were lifted to a higher level than that to which you could rise unaided? On such occasions you grasp questions that hitherto have eluded you; you see plainly, where before there had been obscurity; the field of thought becomes illumined, and objects are seen in hitherto undreamed-of relations—you feel that you know. On the following day you desire to share with a friend the treasures you acquired, and you begin to recount the luminous exposition, to describe the great horizons which opened before you. You fail: where is the light, where the far-off scenes over which your eyes had swept? Your mind has sunk again to its normal level; the inspiration has passed away. As with the intellectual, so with the moral faculties. You had seen an unknown beauty, had felt an overwhelming admiration for the lofty and the pure: what has become of the warmth, the ardour? Are the cold ashes of the intellectual approval all that remains of the throbbing heart, the passionate delight in the moral ideal? Why does it now look so cold, so grey,

so unattractive? You were raised to a higher level than you can reach unassisted; but none the less has the moral ideal and its power been shown to you "in the Mount," and the fact that you have once experienced its all-compelling power will render you more susceptible to it in the future, and the day will come when that which you felt when inspired by another shall become the normal exercise of your own moral faculties.

Coming to higher grades of inspiration, we may know, some of us, what it is to stand in the presence of the Masters, and to feel the marvellous uplift of Their presence. There is no need for words, no need for teaching; Their presence is enough. From that presence we go out again into the ordinary world, to feel the difference of its atmosphere from that of the Holy One. But, *we have known*, and the memory remains an abiding power.

Those who have written or spoken under inspiration have been thus uplifted, their own intellectual and moral faculties have thus been stimulated, and raised far above their normal level. It is still they who write or speak, and their own characters and temperaments colour what they say, leave their own impress on what they write. But they write and speak far more nobly, far more powerfully than they could do unassisted.

And so we may rise from grade to grade of inspiration until we reach the stage at which the mind and emotions of the man no longer sway his body, but the body is wholly taken possession of and used by One greater than himself. Then it is no longer the man himself who speaks, but "the Spirit of" his "Father who speaketh in" him; his own limitations are struck away, his own idiosyncrasies vanish, and the inspired utterances flow forth unsullied. Then inspiration may range into revelation.

The process of all this is a very simple one. We know that by the correlation between changes in consciousness and vibrations of matter, each change in consciousness is accompanied by a vibration of the matter appropriated by the consciousness and forming its body; each vibration of the matter of a body is accompanied by a change in the embodied consciousness. Either one of the pair may be

the initiator, the other ever responds. When two or more people are together, one more evolved than the other or others, the more evolved person, thinking, desiring, acting, sets up in his own bodies, mental, astral, and physical, a series of vibrations which corresponds to the changes in his consciousness; these vibrations cause similar vibrations in the mental, astral and physical matter intervening between himself and the less advanced person or persons present. These vibrations in the intervening matter cause similar vibrations in the neighbouring body or bodies. These vibrations are immediately answered by corresponding changes in the embodied consciousness or consciousnesses, and the person or persons concerned, thus placed *en rapport* with one more advanced, think, desire, act on a higher level than would be possible for them on their own initiative. They are able to understand more keenly, to feel more warmly, to act more nobly than they could do unassisted. When the stimulus is removed they gradually sink back to their normal level, but memory is left, and they remember that they "have known." Moreover, it is more easy for them to respond a second time, and so on and on, until they establish themselves on the higher level permanently. Hence the value of companionship with those more advanced than ourselves, of living "in their atmosphere." Words are not necessary; little speech may pass; but insensibly the subtle body is tuned to a higher key, and only, perhaps, when the companionship is interrupted do the younger become conscious of the change which has thus been brought about by contact with the elder.

Similar results may be brought about by reading the writings of those who are more evolved than we are. A similar series of changes is set up, though less powerfully than by the living presence. Moreover, intent and reverent study may attract the attention of the writer whether he be in or out of the body, and may draw him to the student, and thus cause the latter to be enveloped in his atmosphere quite as potently as though he were physically present. Hence the value of reading noble literature; we are keyed up to its level for the time, and such reading, steadily perse-

vered in, will lift us to a higher level and establish us thereon. Hence the value of a brief reading before meditation, lifting us into an air more favourable to the work of meditation than we can start from unassisted. Hence the value also of "holy places" for such meditation, places where the atmosphere is literally vibrating at a higher rate than our own; and hence the advice so often given by the instructed, to keep, if possible, a room or closet set apart for meditation, such a place soon gaining an atmosphere purer and subtler than that of the surrounding world. It is of little use for the theosophical student to be acquainted with these laws if he does not utilise them to his own helping, and to the helping of those around him.

What should be the attitude of the theosophical student towards the inspired man or the inspired book? He should be receptive, stilling all his normal vibrations so far as is possible, and opening his whole nature to the impact and influx of the waves of vibration that pour forth upon him. But his attitude should be more than receptive: he should gently endeavour to attune himself and to co-operate with the inflowing waves. He should try to strengthen the sympathetic vibrations, so that the accompanying changes in consciousness may be as complete as possible. For this he must pour out to the inspiring Object his love, his trust, him complete confidence and self-surrender, for thus only can he attune his bodies into sympathy with those of the Inspirer. He must, for the time, empty himself of his own ideas, his own feelings, his own activities, surrendering himself to reproduce, not to initiate. As the unruffled lake can mirror the moon and the stars, but as that same lake rippled by a passing breeze can yield only broken reflexions, so may the lower being, steadying his mind, calming his desires, and imposing stillness on his activities, reproduce within himself the image of the higher, so may the disciples mirror the Master's mind. And so, also, if his own thoughts spring up, his own desires arise, will he have but broken reflexions, dancing lights, that tell him nought.

If you are going to read one of the inspired books of the world—*The Imitation of Christ*; *The Golden Verses of Pythagoras*; *The Light on the Path*; *The Voice of the*

Silence—it is well to preface the reading with a prayer, if that be your habitual way of raising your consciousness to its highest mood, or with the repetition of a mantra, or the soft chanting of some familiar and beloved rhythm, in order to bring yourself into a sympathetic condition. Then read a phrase, re-read, brood over it, savour it mentally, suck out its essence, its life.

Thus shall your subtle body become, to some extent at least, attuned to that of the inspired writer, and repeating his vibrations, shall set up in your consciousness the corresponding changes. Priceless is the value of inspired books: they are steps of a ladder set up between earth and heaven, a veritable Jacob's ladder, on which descend and ascend the angels of God.

There remains a third class of books worthy of the attention of the theosophical student, but towards which his attitude should be entirely different from those which he adopts towards the revealed and the inspired. These are books containing the observations of students more advanced than himself, observations carried on upon planes above the physical, observations made by students who are evolving in knowledge of, and in power on, those planes, and have not yet reached the stature of the Perfect Man. There are books such as *The Secret Doctrine* and *Esoteric Buddhism*, written by disciples, which are not records of the direct observations of students, but are rather transcriptions of the teachings of Masters, into which errors may creep by misunderstandings of those teachings. H. P. Blavatsky herself told us that there were inevitably errors in *The Secret Doctrine*; and as we have in that wonderful book her own descriptions of the pictures shown to her by her Master, there is an opening for possible errors of observation: these are probably not serious, as she was carefully overlooked and aided during the writing. These two books stand apart from the bulk of our literature, the Masters having been largely concerned in their production. The books I have in mind are those written by disciples, using their own normal faculties, faculties still in course of evolution; books relating chiefly to the astral, mental, and buddhic planes, to the constitu-

tion of man, to the past of individuals, nations, races, and worlds. We are gradually accumulating a large amount of literature of this kind, a literature of observations by students using superphysical faculties. With regard to this, certain things need to be borne in mind.

First: the students in question are in course of evolution, and the faculties of which they make use to-day, which have become their normal faculties, are more developed and reach higher planes than those which they used ten or fifteen years ago. Hence they see now very much more than they saw then, both in quantity and quality, and this enlarged sight must inevitably give reports differing in fullness from that of the earlier and narrower vision.

Secondly: this greater fullness will change relative proportions and perspective. A thing which seemed imposing and independent when seen alone, may become subordinate and comparatively insignificant when seen as a part of a larger whole. It may change form and colour, seen with surroundings which become visible only when it is looked at with a higher vision. That which was a globe, sailing through space, to the physical eye, becomes the free end of a continuous body, materially attached to the sun, when seen with superphysical sight. Was it false to describe it a globe? Yes, and no.

It was and is a globe on the physical plane, answering to all that is meant by a globe down here. In subtler regions it is not a globe, but a body, the tip of which is a globe only to gross vision, vision to which its continuation is invisible.

Thirdly: the keener vision detects intermediate stages before unseen, and shows a series of changes between two which, to the less acute sight, were in immediate sequence. Thus, in the earlier observations, it was said that the ultimate physical atom broke up into astral matter. When a similar phenomenon is studied twelve years later, it is seen that the physical atom breaks up into an immense number of inconceivably minute particles, and that these immediately group themselves into forty-nine astral atoms, which may or may not, again, combine into astral molecules. Again, a whirling wall was mentioned: keener

vision sees no wall, but an illusory enclosure, caused by rapid motion, like the fiery circle traced by a whirling fire-tipped stick. So, in the continuous light of gas or electricity, a whirling disk of black and white rays shows grey; put out the lights, and let the darkness be rent by a lightning-flash, the disk hangs motionless, every black and white ray distinct. Which is the true observation? The eye in each case bears true witness to what it *sees*. The different conditions impose upon it different visions.

Other differences also arise, but these may serve as samples. Are, then, books relating to observations useless? They only become useless, even mischievous, when the theosophical student treats them as revelations or inspirations instead of as observations. Observation is the basis of scientific knowledge; the correction of earlier observations by later ones is the condition of scientific progress. The student of optics, when confronted with the black-and-white rayed disk, the grey disk, the whirling disk hanging motionless, does not conclude that the conflicting observations make observations useless. He searches for and finds the conditions of light, of the constitution of the eye, which explain the equally true though contradictory reports. He submits the observations to renewed experiment and to the scrutiny of reason, until from the contradictions emerges the many-sided truth.

What should be the attitude of the theosophical student to books of observations? To all such books you must take up the attitude of the scientific student, not of the believer. You must bring to bear upon them a bright intelligence, a keen mind, an eager intellect, a thoughtful and critical reason. You must not accept as final, observations made by other students, even though those students are using faculties which you yourselves have not as yet developed. You should accept them only for what they are—observations liable to modification, to correction, to reviewal. You should hold them with a light grasp, as hypotheses temporarily accepted until confirmed or negated by further observations, including your own. If they illuminate obscurities, if they conduce to sound morality, take them and use them; but never let them

become fetters to your mind, gaolers of your thought. Study these books, but do not swallow them; understand them, but hold your judgment in suspense: these books are useful servants but dangerous masters; they are to be studied, not worshipped. Make your own opinions, do not borrow those of others; do not be in such a hurry to know that you accept other people's knowledge, for ready-made opinions, like ready-made clothes, are neither well-fitting nor becoming.

There is a dangerous tendency in the Theosophical Society to make books of observations authoritative instead of using them as materials for study. We must not add to the number of blind believers who already exist, but to the number of sane and sober students, who patiently form their own opinions and educate their own faculties. Use your own judgment on every observation submitted to you; examine it as thoroughly as possible; criticise it as fully as you can. It is a poor service you do us when you turn students into popes, and, parrot-like, repeat as authoritative, statements that you do not know to be true. Moreover, blind belief is the road to equally blind scepticism: you place a student on a pedestal and loudly proclaim him to be a prophet, despite his protests; and then, when you find he has made some mistake, as he warned you was likely, you turn round, pull him down, and trample on him. You belabour him when you should belabour your own blindness, your own stupidity, your own anxiety to believe.

Is it not time that we should cease to be children, and begin to be men and women, realising the greatness of our opportunities and the smallness of our achievements? Is it not time to offer to Truth the homage of study instead of that of blind credulity? Let us ever be ready to correct a mistaken impression or an imperfect observation, to walk with open eyes and mind alert, remembering that the best service to Truth is examination. Truth is a sun, shining by its own light; once seen, it cannot be rejected. "Let Truth and falsehood grapple; who ever knew Truth put to the worse in a fair encounter?"

